

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name The Circle

other names/site number DHR Number 124-5089

2. Location

street & 3010 High Street ☐ not for publication
number _____
city or town Portsmouth ☐ vicinity
state Virginia code VA county Portsmouth code 740 Zip 23707

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official Date

Virginia Department of Historic Resources

State or Federal agency and bureau

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

____ entered in the National Register
____ See continuation sheet.
____ determined eligible for the National Register
____ See continuation sheet.
____ determined not eligible for the National Register
____ removed from the National Register
____ other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

<u>X</u>	private
___	public—local
___	public—state
___	public—Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

<u> X </u>	building (s)
<u> </u>	district
<u> </u>	site
<u> </u>	structure
<u> </u>	object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>1</u>	0 buildings
<u>0</u>	0 sites
<u>0</u>	0 structures
<u>0</u>	0 objects
1	0 Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)[illegible]

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

[illegible]

The Circle
Portsmouth (independent city), Virginia

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Modern Movement:	Moderne

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation	Concrete
Roof	Asphalt
Walls	Concrete
Other	

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- ☐ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or a grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

The Circle
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Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance 1947-1955

Significant Dates 1947—erection of restaurant
1954—enclosure of the patio and creation of the Rubaiyat Room

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder Dorothy P. Morgan—building designer
R. A. Culpepper & Son—general contractors

See Continuation Sheet for other Architects

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
previously listed in the National Register
previously determined eligible by the National Register
designated a National Historic Landmark
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary Location of Additional Data

X State Historic Preservation Office.
Other State agency
Federal agency
Local government
University
Other

Name of repository:

The Circle
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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1.0 acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	18	380637	4077375	3			
2				4			

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Kimble A. David, Architectural Historian

Organization Commonwealth Preservation Group date: 17 August 2005

street & number P. O. Box 4266 telephone 757 - 923 - 1900

city or town: Suffolk state: VA zip code: 23439

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Rick Mathews, M. Stewart Mathews, Jr. Revocable Trust

street & number 3562 Western Branch Boulevard telephone 757 - 676 - 1117

city or town Portsmouth state VA zip code 23707

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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**The Circle
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Architectural Description

Summary

The Circle is a curb-service restaurant constructed in 1947. Designed by Dorothy Morgan, it is a Moderne building with a prominent half-circle building mass marking the façade. The half-circle roof parapet is surmounted by metal-framed and neon-lit signs with the restaurant's name, "The Circle". The building is stuccoed concrete block construction with a flat roof. The area within the half-circle contains a dining area and bar with a rounded bench seat along the half-circle wall. The wall behind the bar is painted with a mural attributed to Al Hirschfeld of mid-20th century celebrities. The west end of the building is comprised of a 1954-enclosed patio, which now serves as a dining room. The interior of the building continues the streamline Moderne details found on the exterior.

Detailed Description

The Circle is located on the northwest corner of High Street and Douglas Avenue. The building is set back approximately fifty feet from High Street and one hundred feet from Douglas Avenue. The site is flat. There are concrete sidewalks lining High Street and Douglas Avenue. To the east of the building is an asphalt parking lot with curb cuts on Douglas Avenue. There are crepe myrtle trees planted along High Street between the sidewalk and street and low plantings along the south façade of the building.

The Circle is an original curb-service restaurant, which now serves as a dine-in restaurant. Designed in the Moderne style in 1947, it exhibits typical features of this style, which was popular during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The building was designed by Dorothy P. Morgan and R. A. Culpepper was the general contractor.

The original portion of the building has a half-circle façade, which terminates in a rectangular-shaped block on the south end. It is constructed of concrete block that has been parged. The foundation is poured concrete, which is visible on the interior. The building has a low-slung appearance with a horizontal emphasis marked by the half-circle façade.

The restaurant exhibits Moderne details, such as a glass-block base, plate glass windows, a ribbed metal canopy and the neon-lit restaurant name mounted on the parapet. In addition to Moderne details, the plan of the building uses the rounded façade employed during the 1930s and early 1940s in the Art Deco style.

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The area within the half-circle serves as an indoor dining area along with a counter. The kitchen is located within the rectangular area to the north of the half-circle. The current entrance is on the east side of the building within a small entrance block. The entrance is comprised of a double-leaf, metal framed, plate glass door. The door gains access to the half-circle area of the restaurant. To the north of the entrance, adjacent to the kitchen are the restrooms. To the south of the half-circle is a counter with a glass block base. The wall behind the counter contains a black and white drawing of mid-20th century celebrities attributed to Al Hirschfeld (1903-2003). Behind this wall is an area containing the kitchen. To the north of the kitchen are other food preparation rooms, a small office and a walk-in freezer. The interior walls are dry wall and the ceilings are suspended from the roof structure.

The original outdoor patio located to the west of the building was enclosed in 1954 to accommodate indoor dining. The patio had a terrazzo floor set in a concrete slab, which remains under the wall-to-wall carpeting. The terrazzo is pink in the form of an elongated oval. The pink terrazzo is surrounded by grey terrazzo frame. This dining area is known as the Rubaiyat Room.

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Statement of Significance

Summary

The Circle is an excellent extant example of the curb-service restaurant trend that peaked in the post-World War II period. Constructed in 1947, it features a half-circle façade surmounted by a neon-lit sign with the restaurant's name. It is constructed in the Moderne style, which emphasized curved surfaces and horizontal lines. The Moderne style deviated from traditional forms that were more commonly built during the pre-World War II period using sources from streamlined material cultural sources. In the post-World War II period streamlined design reached its height using modern surfaces and materials seen in automobiles and household appliances. With the advancements in technology, building materials and modern design application, the Circle is a rare example of modern architecture in Portsmouth, Virginia. The Circle is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C for its Moderne design and architectural integrity from the period 1947-1955.

Detailed Statement of Significance

Originally constructed in 1947, The Circle is an example of the drive-in trend in restaurants, which peaked during the immediate post-World War II period. In the post-World War II period, the development of the urban suburbs and the increase in disposable income garnered a reliance on the automobile in American society. By the early 20th century a market began to develop within business to incorporate the ability of patrons to use services without leaving their cars. The most widely known is the drive-in movie theater, which gained popularity in the late 1940s through the 1950s. At this time restaurants were also becoming more service oriented, accommodating customers who wished to dine in their vehicles.

The 1930s saw the emergence of suburban development beyond the early 20th century streetcar suburbs. In Portsmouth most suburban development occurred in the 1940s with the outbreak of World War II. The need for housing for workers at the numerous military facilities in and around Portsmouth precipitated the development of public housing. Many of these neighborhoods were located in the surrounding Norfolk County, which was later annexed by the city of Portsmouth. In 1941, Barrett and Hilp were contracted by the Federal Housing Authority to construct five thousand housing units. This influx of housing for wartime workers increased the demand on services significantly.¹ Simultaneously commerce, which was located primarily in the downtown Portsmouth area expanded farther west toward the newly developed communities.²

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The Circle is located between downtown Portsmouth and the public and private suburban developments constructed in the 1940s. In addition to the Circle, other commercial development in the area during this period included automobile-related commerce, such as automobile dealerships and automobile repair shops. Though automobile-related commerce had developed as early as the 1920s in Portsmouth, it was mostly confined to the east end of the city near the downtown area, which had the highest population.³

The Circle is an example of a curb service restaurant, in which food was ordered while parked adjacent to the restaurant and brought to the patron in his car. In addition to curb service outdoor seating was available on a patio with tables and chairs. There was indoor seating within the half-circle that marked the facade. To the east of the building is an open asphalt parking lot, which is where diners who wished to remain in their cars could receive curb service. To facilitate easy access to diners within their cars, there was an entrance on the east side off the parking lot. In addition, there was an entrance on the west side off the patio.

The restaurant is designed in the Moderne style, which gained popularity during the mid-20th century. The style evolved from the International Movement of architecture originating in pre-World War II Europe. Architecture in the United States began to move away from traditional forms in the early 20th century, but still was largely dominated by buildings of simplified traditional styles. The Moderne style has a horizontal emphasis and uses curved corners and bays and cylindrical elements that were not traditionally associated with building architecture. In addition to curving surfaces, banding became an important element to emphasize the horizontal focus of the building. The Moderne style also employed modern materials, such as concrete block, plate glass and glass block to create smooth forms and transparency. It became mostly popular in industrial and commercial buildings. As a more textural style to the International style, which relied on straight lines and rectangular surfaces, the Moderne style was paralleled with the streamlined material culture available in the post-World War II era. As factories changed output from wartime machinery to household goods, a modern look appeared with curved and shiny surfaces. This was evident in automobile design, which employed sweeping curves and chromed elements. Household goods also took on a more modern appearance with rounded surfaces, circular elements, and chromed appliqué. World War II had also produced an interest in erecting quick and affordable housing using modern and mass-produced materials.⁴

The building was designed by a female building designer, Dorothy Morgan, who was associated with M. Stewart Mathews through her husband who was a salesman for Old Dominion Tobacco Company. Mr. Mathews had previously been employed at Old Dominion Tobacco Company as a salesman prior to opening The Circle. Dorothy Morgan had studied architectural drafting at the Norfolk branch of the College of William and Mary, which is currently Old Dominion University. Ms. Morgan left her

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studies in the 1940s to raise her growing family. She provided building designs for friends of hers and associates of her husband's from the 1940s until her death in 1983. Her body of design work includes Ranch-style houses erected in the Norfolk area. Her design for The Circle was resisted by builders at the time due to its circular façade. Builders rejected the design as viable due to the circular surface, which they believed could not be erected. According to her family, she faced gender-bias since she was a woman, which manifested in difficulty obtaining building services and establishing credibility with architects and contractors.⁵

The Circle's original menu featured pit-cooked barbeque, hamburgers, hot dogs, sandwiches to order, fountain service, and Swift Delicious ice cream. Soon after opening the Circle became a franchisee of Chicken in the Rough, the first fried chicken franchise begun in 1937 by Beverly Osborne in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Begun in Beverly's Restaurant on old Route 66, the restaurant served a half fried chicken "unjointed", shoestring potatoes, honey and hot buttered rolls. The food was intended to be eaten without silverware and was similar to the rise of other franchises serving food that did not require silverware, of which the most famous is McDonald's. Chicken in the Rough predates the most widely known fried chicken restaurant currently in operation, Kentucky Fried Chicken.⁶

Unlike McDonald's, the Chicken in the Rough franchise and other early franchises did not specify a building style and appearance. The franchise was sold to restaurants to operate within pre-existing buildings. The restaurants also retained their name and marketed Chicken in the Rough separately. The Chicken in the Rough franchise expired by the early 1960s though The Circle continued to serve similar fast food.⁷

The restaurant was owned by Harry Hopewell and M. Stewart Mathews, Jr., brothers-in-law and natives of Portsmouth. After Mathews returned from his tour in World War II, he approached his brother-in-law and father about jointly opening a restaurant. Mr. Hopewell and Mr. Mathews, Jr. solely operated the restaurant until Mr. Stewart Mathews, Sr. joined them in the early 1950s. By the late 1950s, Mr. Hopewell left the restaurant to work for the City of Portsmouth.⁸

The restaurant operated in its original configuration until 1954, when the patio was enclosed for an indoor dining area. Outdoor restaurants are more conducive to warmer climates where the winters are more temperate. Though Portsmouth's winter was shorter due to its location near coastal Virginia, the winter months were still cold. The half-circle area for indoor dining was not adequate to accommodate the number of patrons.

In 1954 the patio was enclosed and named the "Rubaiyat Room". Curb service was still available, but with the enclosure of the patio additional indoor dining could be accommodated. The enclosure of the

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patio was in keeping with the Moderne style of the original half-circle façade. The southwest corner of the enclosure was curved and features a glass block window. In keeping with the original Moderne features, the awning was extended across the façade on the Rubaiyat Room and fixed plate glass windows were installed.⁹

A rubaiyat is a quatrain, which is an iambic pentameter rhyme scheme of *aaba* within four versus. The most famous is the Rubaiyat of Omar Kayyam from ca. 1000. He was a Persian poet, mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, scientist who made contributions to the calendar, mathematics, algebra and is widely known for his “Rubaiyat”. Ms. M. Stewart Mathews was an avid reader and was fond of the Rubaiyat of Omar Kayyam and chose the name for the enclosed patio.

During the 1960s the menu moved away from food served without silverware to traditional restaurant style American fare. The restaurant was family operated until the mid-1980s when it was leased to a protégé of M. Stewart Mathews who continued to operate the restaurant until 2003. The restaurant is undergoing a renovation by the sons of M. Stewart Mathews, the current owners, who plan to reopen the building as a restaurant.¹⁰

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Major Bibliographical References

Liebs, Chester H. Main Street to Miracle Mile: American roadside architecture. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.

“Make a Date with Family and Friends to have Dinner at...The Circle.” Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, 9 March 1954.

Telephone Interview with Judge Henry C. Morgan, 19 August 2005.

Telephone Interview with Michael B. Newbill, 19 August 2005.

Telephone Interview with Scott Morgan, 19 August 2005.

Telephone Interview with Rick Mathews, 9 February 2005.

“The Circle: an Ultra-Modern Drive-In...Formally Opening Today.” Portsmouth Star, 10 November 1947.

Whiffen, Marcus. American Architecture Since 1780: A guide to the styles. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969.

“World’s Biggest Prefab Job.” American Builder and Building Age. June 1942.

Sanborn Map Company. Insurance Maps of Portsmouth. New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1920.

<http://www.track16.com/exhibitions/eats/rough.html>.

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Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

This building is situated on parcel numbers 214 to 225 on Block D of Tax Map 160. The property tax map identification number is 01600790. This property is denoted as 3010 High Street, Portsmouth, Virginia, 23707-3425 and comprises one acre.

Boundary Justification

The boundaries of the property are those originally associated with the building and continue to be associated with the building.

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Endnotes:

¹ “World’s Biggest Prefab Job.” American Builder and Building Age. June 1942, 54.

² Sanborn Map Company, “Insurance Maps of Portsmouth,” (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1920).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Whiffen, Marcus, American Architecture Since 1780: A guide to the styles,” (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), 241-245.

⁵ Telephone Interviews with Judge Henry C. Morgan, Scott Morgan and Michael B. Newbill, 19 August 2005.

⁶ <http://www.track16.com/exhibitions/eats/rough.html>.

⁷ Telephone Interview with Rick Mathews, 9 February 2005.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.